

Writing a Media Analysis

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Non-profit organizations and foundations need to understand the media landscape in order to gain a thorough understanding of how to present their positions on critical issues. Media analyses can be used to identify messages, examine how those messages are framed, and see how existing coverage of an issue could be improved. These analyses entail systematically taking a “slice” of media coverage from a set time-frame, often in the top daily newspapers, magazines and broadcast news outlets. The coverage can be classified and analyzed to identify communication opportunities for nonprofits and foundations, and strategic recommendations can be drawn to help them effectively disseminate their messages.

While a communications firm or a media expert can offer in-depth analysis of news coverage on a particular issue or group, if the suggestions below are followed, an analysis can be done in-house by foundations or non-profits, even those without a media background.

A typical media analysis can answer the following questions:

How do the media frame public discussion of an issue (by repeating various story elements, using common metaphors, quoting similar people, etc.)?

Who are the main spokespeople on a particular topic, and how are they being quoted? Are they mainly advocates, policymakers, academic experts, etc.?

How often are various spokespeople quoted and in what context?

What topics are being covered, and what topics are being ignored?

Which outlets are covering or ignoring an issue or organization that they should be covering?

Is there a time of year when an issue or organization is more likely to be covered than others?

Is a topic or organization front-page news, and if not, where in the paper is that topic or organization covered?

Which reporters are writing on this issue/organization?

What messages are being used?

One recent media analysis entitled “**Between A Rock and a Hard Place: An Analysis of Low-Wage Workers in the Media**” (available at www.economythatworks.org/reports.htm) was a crucial first step in building a communications strategy to enhance the visibility of low-wage workers and the obstacles they face in pursuing the so-called “American dream.” Based on the findings of the media analysis, the suggested strategy for advocates was to reframe their messages to portray low-wage workers as important contributors to the economy, rather than as sympathetic victims.

Some findings from this analysis included:

The primary media frame is that the system – government and society at large – has failed low-wage workers.

The media tend to tell sympathetic stories of individual low-wage workers in the United States, but don't do many stories on the systemic causes of poverty.

According to media depictions, low-wage workers are continually caught between a rock and a hard place -- with no place left to turn. In other words, their situation is hopeless.

Radio and television outlets seldom present stories about low-wage workers.

From these findings, some conclusions may be drawn about how to better communicate about low-wage work to help drive policy change. For instance:

It's a problem when low-wage workers are not covered in broadcast media because most people get their news from television. Organizations wishing to help low-wage workers should put special effort into developing stories suitable for broadcast, including providing visuals to television journalists and reaching out to radio talk show hosts.

If the situation of low-wage workers is continually presented in the media as being hopeless, then there is little motivation for people to take action for change. Those who wish to assist low-wage workers must encourage reporters to write stories that suggest solutions to the problems of low-wage workers, or at least do not imply that those problems are intractable.

Another analysis on how foundations and philanthropy are portrayed in the media (available at www.douglasgould.com/resources/Index.htm) found that when it comes to public attitudes, foundations have allowed other actors to define their work and role in society. In covering philanthropic issues, the media often quote people not directly associated with foundations, and this allows important issues about foundation work to be framed without input from the foundations themselves. The strategic recommendation that can be inferred from this finding is that foundations must take charge of how they are understood by being intentional about both the substance and style they wish to convey. They should exert greater effort toward helping reporters, and through them the American public, to better understand the nature and character of philanthropy and foundations' role in civil society.

Upon examining coverage of public education in New York City for another analysis, it was learned that politicians are quoted more often than those affected directly by the public education system – students and parents – and advocates working on their behalf. The analysis indicates that advocates must aggressively reach out to reporters to become the quoted authorities on the New York City

schools, offering to represent an alternative voice in the media coverage on education policy debates.

Another interesting analysis was done in 2001 to assess the media coverage of religion and culture. As expected, it was learned that there was a huge increase in media attention to the intersection of religion and culture following the events of September 11. As a result of this analysis, it was recommended that advocates and religious scholars seize the moment to be heard in order to create a deeper public understanding of the relationships between religion and culture.

Another recent media analysis focused on education funding reform, particularly on a lawsuit filed by a nonprofit group against the state of New York to change the public school funding formula. This analysis made clear that, for advocates, the best communications strategy was to seek quotes in the press about how their work relates to the lawsuit.

All of these analyses were used to improve the media strategies of various nonprofit groups, foundations, and spokespeople. Ideally, a follow-up media analysis should be conducted after a year or two, with the goal of analyzing changes in media coverage in order to assess the effectiveness of any strategy modifications.

Methodology

The first step in crafting a media analysis methodology is to develop search terms. For the analysis on low-wage workers, the initial search term was “low-wage workers” but a quick look at the retrieved stories showed that while some of the stories focused on low-wage workers, many just mentioned them in a laundry list of interest groups and had nothing to do with their experience. As a result, a list of topics that would help zero in on articles that focused on the experience and perspective of low-wage workers was crafted. These topics reflected the challenges and obstacles that low-wage workers face in their everyday lives. Inclusion of these topics in the search helped ensure that stories that merely mentioned low-wage workers in a casual way would be less frequent in the results. Topics included affordable housing, benefits, child care, health insurance, hunger, job training, taxes, social security, earned income tax credit, living wage, education, family medical leave, minimum wage, and food stamps.

It was also important to note that reporters may use a variety of different labels in referring to low-wage workers, and that the stories in which these alternative labels were employed were not showing up in the retrieved sample. So, a list of six different labels most commonly used in reference to low-wage workers was crafted (former welfare recipient, low-income worker, low-wage worker, welfare leavers, welfare to work, and working poor). Then, electronic searches for stories that contained at least one of the labels coupled with at least one of the topics were performed.

Once search terms are determined, the next step is to develop a list of news outlets which will be the focus of the sample. The top 10 daily newspapers in the country (*The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The Detroit Free Press*), the top two nationally circulated newspapers (*USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*), three national news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*), six national broadcast outlets (*National Public Radio*, *CNN*, *Fox News Channel*, *NBC News*, *ABC News*, *CBS News*), two wire services, (*Associated Press*, *Reuters*) and one Internet news source (*Salon.com*) are often used, since they reach a large segment of the population, especially opinion leaders, in the largest U.S. media markets.

Media analyses examine articles from a set time-frame, usually about six months. For example, the philanthropy media analysis examined stories from July 2002 to January 2003, and the low-wage worker analysis looked at stories from Feb 1, 2001 through July 31, 2001.

To obtain the articles, the appropriate search terms are entered into electronic databases, usually Dow Jones/Factiva and the Lexis Nexis search engine. (More information on these databases can be found at www.factiva.com and www.lexis.com). Both charge fees for users, but another database which is useful for searching for recent articles and is free of charge is Google News at www.news.google.com.

Even with the right search terms, sometimes the stories don't match what one is looking for. Sometimes words may be included in articles that are mentioned in passing, but are not relevant. When this happens, the irrelevant articles must be discarded. Examples would be obituaries, calendar items, and articles which mention search terms out of context. In many cases, only 40 percent of retrieved stories actually focus on targeted topics. This number can also vary widely -- from 13 percent in one analysis to 94 percent in another -- and depends largely on whether the terms used in the search are generic words used often by reporters.

A manageable sample for a typical media analysis is between 100 and 200 stories. If one still has too many articles for a manageable sample even after sifting through them to discard what is irrelevant, the sample must be narrowed by randomly selecting articles. So, if 300 articles on a topic are identified, a sample is drawn to achieve a manageable number for careful scrutiny. Typically every second or third story would be randomly chosen for analysis. This sampling technique increases the accuracy of the findings.

The Analytical Process of the Media Analysis

Once the sample is drawn, articles are read closely. First, stories are classified by type-- opinion, news, or feature.

Opinion pieces can be letters to the editor, op-eds, columns, or editorials. News pieces are straightforward articles which report on the latest events in the world.

Feature stories are usually more in-depth pieces, sometimes lighter pieces, and often profile stories.

In addition to analyzing the type of story, it is important to take note of where each story ran in the newspaper or magazine. Observe if a story ran on the front page, the national, international, business, or metro section, or if it was published in the lifestyles, arts, sports, or a special section. Editors make important decisions regarding where to place each story, and these decisions should be noted for each article. Both the Lexis-Nexis and Factiva databases include this information. Wire stories, TV broadcasts, and Internet stories are classified based on the scope or reach of the outlet. For example, a story on the CBS Evening News would be classified as national news; a story on the BBC (if that were included in the sample) would be classified as international news. A news special would be classified in the “special section” category.

It is also important to analyze when stories ran. Coverage of certain issues is tied to the calendar. For example, in an analysis on stories related to philanthropy, it was noted that the incidence of stories on charitable giving or philanthropy spiked during the holiday season (November through January) when people turn their attention to food drives and giving thanks for the basics. As a result, the strategic recommendation for nonprofits and foundations was to approach the media during this time of year.

In addition to looking at story type, timing and placement within the newspaper, one should also look at story topics. Topics show how an issue is being covered and what opportunities there are for linking the mission and interests of a nonprofit group to current coverage on that issue. For the analysis on stories related to philanthropy, news pieces fell into topical categories such as:

- Individual contribution, major donor, or fundraising campaign
- Trends in charitable giving
- Charitable giving tips
- Fraud

Given this information, a foundation or nonprofit organization might want to develop materials that elaborate on often-used story topics, for example a list of the “Top 10 Tips for Charitable Giving.” Another approach would be to put fraud stories in perspective for the press by pointing out the number of fraud cases in relation to the huge numbers of Americans who make sound investments in the nation’s future through their charitable contributions. Still another approach would be to make it a priority to expand the topic areas in which philanthropy is covered by offering alternative ideas to reporters.

Spokesperson Analysis

Whoever is quoted about a particular issue within a news story has increased impact on how that issue is portrayed to the public. Usually spokespeople fall into the following categories, although categories vary depending on the focus of the analysis: advocates, business leaders/professionals, public/government officials, members of the general public, and academics. One should tally which groups are quoted most often, along with how many people in each group are quoted, and create a chart to help analyze why some groups are quoted more than others.

In the analysis on philanthropy, nonprofit staff members were quoted most often, followed by the general public. Religious leaders and journalists were quoted least often. This is odd, since by far the bulk of charitable gifts are made to religious institutions. This finding implies that there are opportunities for religious leaders to become sources of information to journalists about charitable giving, if only they would pursue those opportunities more aggressively.

Framing Analysis

It is also important to determine how stories are framed. Frames reflect a specific viewpoint or mindset. An analysis of how a story is framed involves looking at a story's content and seeing how reporters connect its topic to the archetypal stories that already exist within people's minds. There are, for example, some classic archetypal story frames, such as the "self-made man" story and the "hero takes a fall" story. These story frames carry with them strong associations that can be negative or positive, and their use tends to activate those associations in the minds of readers and viewers. For instance, the "self-made man" frame carries with it the positive associations of hard work and deserved success. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the "hero takes a fall" story can carry with it negative associations such as he behaved badly, made mistakes or was never who he claimed to be.

By identifying frames, one can determine some of the underlying messages that the media are inadvertently sending. In the analysis on low-wage workers, some of the frames included:

Government incompetence – These stories were framed with the idea that government agencies and programs are inadequately addressing the needs of low-wage workers, or even that government is causing problems for this group. Government officials may have tried to reform programs designed to help low-wage workers, but poor planning and implementation have actually made things worse. In using this frame, reporters sometimes referred to a tangled web of bureaucracy, which often blocked access to services and benefits.

Rock and a hard place -- The notion that low-wage workers are often trapped between a rock and a hard place was a popular frame used by reporters. The underlying theme was the prevalence of unintended social consequences from reform efforts such as TANF, which have placed low-

wage workers in a bind. The focus of this frame was not actual policy efforts, but the effect of those efforts on low-wage workers themselves. The economic ladder -- The underlying theme here is the allusion itself: our economic system is a ladder, with lower wage people at the bottom and higher wage people near the top. This allusion suggests, of course, the traditional notion that still resonates with many Americans: that hard work and toil has a lot to do with how high you climb on the ladder, and through hard work, you, too, can make it to the top. Use of the ladder image also implies that there will always be some people at the bottom and "that's just the way it is."

Falling behind -- The idea that low-wage workers are somehow "falling behind" the rest of society in terms of economic and social gains was another common frame, similar in nature to the economic ladder frame. There was a sense in stories framed this way that the world is rapidly moving forward and won't slow down for those who cannot keep up the pace. The assumption here is that some people fall behind due to their own individual faults; seldom considered is that they might be falling behind because of systemic faults.

Welfare myth -- These stories were framed with long-standing myths about welfare and people on public assistance. The myths revolve around three separate, but related themes: the notion that people on public assistance are "freeloaders," the concept of welfare as prison, and the idea of the undeserving or unappreciative individual.

More than one frame can appear in the same story, and although most stories have frames, not every one does.

To learn more about frames, an excellent resource is an essay by George Lakoff, a University of California Professor of Linguistics, called "Simple Framing" at http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/perspectives/simple_framing

Structuring the Media Analysis

When writing the analysis, begin with an executive summary that includes an introduction, the purpose of the analysis, and its major findings. The executive summary is followed by the methodology, the topic analysis, the framing analysis, the spokesperson analysis, and conclusions and recommendations. Appendices for a list of reporters and article citations should also be included.

Comparative Analyses

Sometimes it can be very informative to compare media coverage from one year to the next. For example, in the media analysis on philanthropy, to examine how coverage of philanthropy changed over five years, one set of philanthropy-related stories -- which was published between July 1997 and January 1998 -- was compared to another set of philanthropy-related stories from a comparable six-month period in 2002-2003. Comparisons were made to see if story topics varied between the time periods, if reporters were quoting the same types of

people in 2002-2003 that they were quoting in 1997-1998, and if the type of articles or the outlets covering philanthropy were significantly different between the two time periods.

Findings indicated that the truth about philanthropy has been sidelined over the past five years. Between sample periods, there was a huge decline in coverage of individual contributions, major donors, or fundraising campaigns. There was also a decline in coverage of corporate philanthropy, probably due to the sluggish economy. These stories were mostly positive in their tone, and likely left readers with a favorable view of major donors and nonprofit groups. A key finding was that this decline in coverage of “good works” by individuals and companies was an alarming trend that foundations and nonprofit groups should address promptly.

Media Analysis versus Media Evaluation

As noted earlier, a typical media analysis examines approximately 100-200 articles. This is obviously a time consuming process, so sometimes nonprofit groups should consider examining a smaller number of articles. For a media evaluation, the articles are analyzed in a similar but less rigorous way, usually including about 50 or 60 articles within either a smaller time frame and/or related to a more specific topic.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Organizations undertaking media analyses should keep tally spreadsheets for each major area to be examined. In other words, you might have one spreadsheet for the spokespeople quoted in your articles, another for the types of stories, another for the frames, etc. Keep in mind that these projects are quite time-consuming since the analysis must examine articles in many different ways; one cannot just passively skim the articles as a typical reader might.

The final report should provide a good idea of what opportunities are available to a particular nonprofit group or individual spokesperson, where reporters are writing about the organization’s key issues and what the best angles for coverage might be. The finished media analysis should show the extent of media coverage of the key issues; how those issues are being framed; which messages are being communicated through the media coverage and which are being missed; which spokespeople are identified and quoted in the stories; if there is a time of year in which stories on the issue are more likely to be written; where in the newspaper the issues are most likely to be covered; and which reporters and outlets are covering the issues. Findings from the media analysis will help nonprofit organizations craft more effective media strategies and address challenges to getting their messages across to target audiences.